

Hezbollah Will Rebuild Unless Borders Enforced

Tom Lantos | Fri. Oct 06, 2006

Among the ruins of south Beirut, Hezbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah hailed a massive rally a few days ago. People jammed the streets to see him, crying out his name.

In many Damascus shop windows, meanwhile, the rotund little sheik, often pictured hoisting high an AK-47 in homage to the Hezbollah logo, now enjoys pride of place: His image is displayed side by side with the late Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser, another charismatic demagogue who led the Arab world to disaster.

This horror show could have been avoided long before Hezbollah seized two Israeli soldiers in a cross-border raid that provoked a 34-day war. It is not too late to prevent a repeat performance — provided that the right people take note this time.

Before addressing what could have been and what might still be, let's consider some of the other consequences of the month-long battle that scarred countless families and made rubble of myriad homes on both sides of the border.

First, containing Iran got shoved off the global agenda. The G-8 meeting intended to address halting Tehran's attempts at nuclear proliferation essentially was kidnapped by Hezbollah's raid and Israel's retaliation. Second, the growing jihadist movement has likely gained new adherents in the Middle East, and terrorism-patrons Iran and Syria have gained stature there. And not least, the United States has suffered yet another black eye in the region for doing what was right: standing by its ally, insisting that a sovereign nation's borders be respected, and refusing to join the rising chorus of calls for an immediate ceasefire.

Not only could all of this have been avoided, the United States could have prevented it. If the Bush administration had only bothered to enforce legislation that I wrote in 2001, Lebanon would have had to deploy more troops to suppress Hezbollah, and this summer's awful events might never have happened. My amendment to that year's Foreign Relations Authorization Act placed conditions on foreign aid requiring that Beirut take effective control of its border with Israel as it had been obligated to do under United Nations Security Council Resolution 425. As debate arose over the matter on the House floor, I told my colleagues, "It is difficult to fathom who would benefit from allowing an international border in a volatile and fragile and explosive area to be controlled by terrorists who openly and clearly have no desire to return to the peace process."

It is almost surreal now to realize it, but I also said at the time, "There will be more terrorist attacks by Hezbollah, there will be stronger retaliation, and we may be on the verge of yet another military confrontation, a bloodbath in the Middle East, which is the last thing U.S. national interests would call for."

Had the administration not been so shortsighted, if it had only shown the wisdom and guts to implement my legislation five years ago, Israelis and Lebanese could have been spared the horrors of this past July and August.

I raise this matter not to claim special prescience, but to show that it took only a bit of ordinary foresight to know that if Lebanon failed to take the steps expected of it under a U.N. resolution, if it failed to show a

reasonable interest in its own territorial integrity and to battle back the armed gangsters who were taking control of its land, a violent conflict would arise.

And yet, once this legislation was signed into law, it simply was ignored. We continued to provide assistance as usual to Lebanon, even though it had not fully deployed its forces to its southern border. The White House failed to meet its obligation, as described in the new law, to certify these facts and to report to Congress on plans to end such assistance. Both Beirut and Washington maintained the status quo ante.

Without incentive to change its behavior, the government in Beirut sat back and watched the arms flow across its border to Hezbollah as the terrorists dug in, missiles and all, in occupation of both Lebanon's border with Israel and all of its southern region. Meanwhile, Israel's repeated warnings that Hezbollah was amassing thousands of rockets were met by reactions ranging from skepticism to indifference in the international community, including our executive branch.

We've had quite enough of that. It is obviously not in our country's interest, nor that of civilization as a whole, to accept a world in which terrorist bands can trigger cross-border conflicts in violation of international law. There can never be real democracy or sovereignty in Lebanon, or anywhere, if governments cede control to terrorists.

Last week, by a vote of 411 to 5, the House of Representatives passed my resolution stating that Lebanon should enforce its border with Syria to eliminate the illicit arms trade that fuels Hezbollah, and that it should seek a robust international force deployment to do that. Without such a move, another Hezbollah-provoked war will break out, with horrendous consequences for the people of Lebanon, Israel and the entire region.

A few weeks ago, upon the announcement of a cease-fire, I stepped off an American military helicopter onto the grounds of the American embassy in Beirut. Coincidentally, this was the 50th anniversary of my first visit to Lebanon. On this latest visit, our ambassador took me to see the top government leaders to discuss the path forward on reconstructing that war-torn land and freeing it from the stranglehold in which Hezbollah has held it for far too many years.

I was shaken by what I discovered. In my view, the Lebanese government fully understands that the flow of weapons from Syria and Iran to Hezbollah must end, or they will once again find their nation at war, not of their own making. But at the same time, I was left with the clear impression that the Lebanese leaders are petrified of what may happen if they finally confront Syria's dictator.

In August, the U.N. Security Council mandated an international deployment only on Lebanon's border with Israel. U.N. officials left it up to the Lebanese government to request the world's help with respect to its border with Syria and the Lebanese coastline.

Hezbollah's missiles and other major weapons come from Syria and Iran, and virtually all of them are smuggled in via Syria. To keep these weapons out of its house and out of Hezbollah's hands, Lebanon must hermetically seal its border to illegal arms shipments. Until that time, we will face the re-supply of weapons to the terrorists and the near-certain renewal of hostilities. Unless international troops are on the Syrian border, the conflict between Hezbollah and Israel will flare again.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has said he would deem an international force deployment on the Lebanese-Syrian border a "hostile" act. With our resolution, my congressional colleagues and I pledged our support for Lebanon against Syria's campaign of intimidation. Lebanon's leaders simply must summon up the courage to overcome their fear of Syria; if they do not request this deployment, they may be in danger of losing their country once more to dominance by Damascus and its Hezbollah henchmen. Lebanon's border with Syria must be reinforced. Otherwise, arms will flow easily to the terrorists and, at a time of their choosing, they will attack. They care neither for peace in the region nor for Lebanese sovereignty. They care only about increasing

their own power and, in their own way but with substantial help from others, wiping Israel off the map.

Rep. Tom Lantos of California, the ranking Democrat on the House International Relations Committee, is the only Holocaust survivor ever elected to Congress.

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